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AN IRAN WITH A popular, accountable, and rights-regarding (PAR) government would not be a threat, even if it developed a nuclear weapon. But an Iran with a president who denies the Holocaust, who will not deny that he called for the eradication of Israel, and who won popular election through a rhetoric and a radicalism that worry even the mullahs is a grave potential threat. At the same time, Iran is the modern heir to a great Persian culture, one of the cradles of civilization as we know it. It is a legitimate rising power, in the sense that its size, natural and human resources, history, and geography all entitle its people to aspire to be recognized as a major power in its region and the world. Our approach to Iran must acknowledge and proceed on both these realities.

The solution is to give Mahmoud Ahmadinejad the bear-hug treatment. We should enfold him in an iron embrace, engaging him in ways that either tame him or expose him as a danger not only to the world but to the Iranian people. Concretely, we should engage Iran on three fronts: Iraq, a broader Middle East peace settlement, and nuclear weapons. On all three fronts, we must pursue diplomacy with Iranian political and religious leaders and dialogue, as much as possible, with the Iranian people.

On Iraq, the United States should begin from the premise that the Sunnis and the Shiites are now waging a civil war, leaving only two feasible options for the United States: (1) work with other powers in the region, particularly Iran, Syria, and Saudi Arabia, to reach a political settlement that can be enforced; or (2) withdraw and leave a civil war raging on Iran's borders. Iran has already signaled that it does not want a civil war that could spill over to Sunnis in Iran itself or that draws Iran directly into a much wider regional conflict. A simmering conflict that keeps the United States tied down is one thing. A raging conflict with the United States gone is quite another, creating a major incentive to negotiate, requiring Ahmadinejad and the mullahs at least to explain to the Iranian population why it is

sometimes acceptable to sit down with the Great Satan.

IN A BROADER Middle East settlement, the United States should embrace the plan put forward by King Abdullah of Jordan in March 2002 as the basis for a regional and international conference aimed at bringing peace to the Middle East as a whole. That plan proposed that the Arab world establish "normal relations" with Israel and recognize the Arab-Israeli conflict to be concluded in exchange for Israeli withdrawal from the Occupied Territories, Israeli recognition of an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital, and a just solution for Palestinian refugees. An additional topic for this peace conference would be the establishment of a Helsinki Process for all Middle Eastern countries, whereby they would agree to a set of political and economic "baskets" of commitments designed to bring all their governments up to PAR and establish a Conference on Security and Cooperation in the Middle East to oversee a process of implementing these commitments. At the same time, we should encourage Israel to do everything possible to make a separate peace with Syria, leaving Iran deprived of its arc of influence and faced with the prospect of rising Saudi influence in the Middle East, unless it is willing to come to the table as well.

On nuclear weapons, the United States should be willing to offer Iran assurances that assuage its legitimate fears. These assurances might include a negative security assurance—a promise not to attack Iran except in response to Iranian military action or direct Iranian support of a terrorist attack against the United States, Europe, or Israel. This offer would hinge on an Iranian commitment not to pursue a nuclear weapons capability and Iranian willingness to allow that commitment to be verified by the International Atomic Energy Agency. At the same time, the five nuclear powers and several leading non-nuclear powers should announce an emergency review conference at which the original bargain of atoms for peace will be updated and the restrictions on

all declared nuclear powers will become more stringent, raising the cost of being a nuclear power. This will provide a face-saving device for the Iranians to suspend all uranium enrichment activities until the conclusion of the conference.

In all of these efforts, the United States must present a united front with Europe. Above all, our combined activity must be steady and constant, allowing no time for Iranian divide-and-conquer delay tactics. We should smother Ahmadinejad with attention. He will claim victories, but our response must be to demand genuine engagement, meaning a willingness to strike genuine and verifiable bargains. We must also be able to offer real carrots for more responsible behavior, such as the prospect of aid in developing gas supplies that will enable Iran to provide an alternative source to Russian gas fields, and/or the pros-

pect of membership in a G-8 expanded to a G-15 or G-20.

If these combined initiatives fail either to rein in Ahmadinejad or to deprive him of support within Iran, then his personal pathologies and the profound dangers of the fanatical populism he is spreading will be clear to all responsible nations. At that point the case for direct action against him will be far more compelling. ●

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